

NC EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE FOR HIGHWAY SAFETY
OLDER DRIVER WORKING GROUP

STRATEGIES
TO REDUCE HIGHWAY CRASHES, INJURIES, AND FATALITIES
INVOLVING OLDER DRIVERS

The Older Driver Working Group of the NC DOT Executive Committee for Highway Safety¹ is one of several technical committees organized around various topics of importance to the state's strategic highway safety plan. The UNC-CH Highway Safety Research Center brought this group together originally as a senior driver safety coalition with the help of a grant from the Governor's Highway Safety Program. The coalition was invited to serve as the Executive Committee's older driver working group in 2005 and to date has developed and begun implementation of seven strategies to reduce crashes and promote older driver safety.

Strategy #1. Improve signs at non-standard interchange approaches.

- The size, letter height, and placement of signs (especially signs placed in advance of non-standard interchanges to give drivers better warning about which lane of traffic to use for entering and exiting roadways) is an important strategy for roadway improvements that benefit older drivers and the general driving public.
- NC DOT adopted a traffic safety design standard for new or replacement signs in 2008, and the new standard has been applied in a few locations since this strategy was written. The availability of funding is a barrier to retrofitting older signs, but the new design standard will be applied to new and replacement signage.

Strategy #2. Identify hazardous intersections and improve their safety for older drivers.

- The Older Driver Working Group established a roadway subcommittee early in its work as a coalition to examine crash data and identify locations where older drivers were involved in a relatively high percentage of the crashes. Twenty intersections statewide were identified where at least 40% of the crashes involved an older driver. Several locations that appeared to have correctable patterns were selected for on-site investigations.
- Regional DOT engineers for the selected locations teamed up with volunteers from the AARP Driver Safety Program to assess ways to make the intersections less dangerous and make recommendations for design or operational changes.

¹ The Executive Committee for Highway Safety is a state level task force formed by NC DOT in 2003 to establish the goals of the state's highway safety plan and promote the development of policies and programs to reduce highway crashes, injuries, and fatalities.

Each location has many factors contributing to its crash history. In some cases the needed countermeasures are costly, and the challenge is to identify funding sources for the needed improvements. Like other highway safety improvements, these recommended changes are being evaluated and prioritized for implementation.

Strategy #3. Build capacity among engineers, planners, and other practitioners to accommodate the needs of older drivers.

- NC DOT periodically offers workshops based on the *Highway Design Handbook for Older Drivers and Pedestrians*, a set of recommendations released by the Federal Highway Administration.
- North Carolina already incorporates some of these recommendations into its standards of practice, but ongoing training for new staff also offers exposure to experienced staff about these concepts for roadway design and traffic operations.

Strategy #4. Strengthen DMV training for identifying drivers at increased risk of crashing, while fostering a positive environment for the testing of older drivers experiencing declines.

- License examiners play a pivotal role in identifying at-risk drivers who should not be licensed to drive or who should have restrictions placed on their licenses. The NC DMV Medical Review Program staff periodically offer training to license examiners to strengthen their ability to recognize drivers at increased risk for crashing while still offering a positive and respectful environment for testing older drivers and their medical fitness to drive.
- Small staffs in DMV examiner stations across the state make attendance at in-service trainings a challenge, but other options such as training CDs are being explored.
- There have been discussions about NC DMV carrying out a pilot project for road testing certain older drivers in their home driving environment when their licenses have restricted them to driving within 5 miles of their homes and the DMV office is located outside that radius.

Strategy #5. Increase public awareness of older driver issues and resources for maintaining safe mobility.

- There is a great need for reliable information about safe mobility in later life. The challenge is to have needed information readily available in a variety of venues and in formats relevant to all the people who may use and share it – older drivers, family members, professionals who work with older adults, and the general public.

- The Older Driver Working Group held workshops in five selected communities (Wilmington, Southern Pines, Waynesville, Greensboro, and the Wake-Durham-Orange area) in 2006 to replicate the idea of bringing together locally a broad-based group of stakeholders like the working group itself. The materials gathered for these forums helped the working group members identify a host of good resources suitable for a variety of audiences.
- The working group also has plans to develop a NC website for the posting of information. Current plans are to house this website with NC DMV, but many members also plan to maintain information on their own websites and have the information linked to the DMV website.

Strategy #6. Engage law enforcement in implementing older driver safety initiatives.

- Law enforcement is a key partner in identifying at-risk drivers. The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has developed a curriculum to help educate law enforcement on how to recognize unsafe older drivers during traffic stops and crash investigations. The staff of the NC Justice Academy with help from the Older Driver Working Group proposed a version of this curriculum for use in North Carolina. In late 2009 the NC Justice Academy Commission approved a required 4-hour curriculum on older drivers as the topic of choice for the 2011 Commission-mandated officer recertification hours.
- The Older Driver Working Group received a small grant from the National Center on Senior Transportation that is going to allow, among other things, for the printing and lamination of “older driver cue cards” for law enforcement as part of a pilot project. The intent of the proposed pilot is to determine the usefulness of information about older driver safety in this format when officers are making a traffic stop or when an older driver approaches them for assistance.

Strategy #7. Engage physicians and other health care providers in implementing older driver safety initiatives.

- Physicians and other healthcare workers have been identified as a key partner and target group to engage in keeping older drivers using the road safely. This is the Older Driver Working Group’s newest strategy. There are many resources already available, including the American Medical Association’s guidelines for assessing older drivers. Preliminary discussions are underway with the Wake Area Health Education Center (AHEC) about educational opportunities.
- Physicians have had civil immunity for reporting unsafe drivers to DMV for evaluation of their medical fitness to drive since 1997. As a group, physicians already are one of the major sources of referrals to the Medical Review Branch of DMV, and the Older Driver Working Group hopes to build upon that foundation.